

Lake County communities explore sharing equipment

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Plain Dealer Reporter

Instead of buying a new lawn mower this spring, imagine pooling your money with your neighbors and getting a machine that could be shared up and down the block.

By taking turns, it could save everybody money while never missing the chance to give your lawn that weekly trim.

That's the kind of cooperation Ohio Auditor Dave Yost wants to see from local governments that own heavy equipment, such as road

graders and street sweepers, that might just as easily be passed around the county.

His office has taken the first step toward making that happen by studying heavy equipment use in Lake County. The results were unveiled Tuesday morning at a news conference in a Painesville Public Works garage.

The study looked at how efficiently Lake County government and nearly two dozen cities and townships in the county use their trucks and machinery.

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Localities could also save by collaborating on new purchases. A new backhoe costs \$90,000, while the price tag on an aerial truck used to replace street lights is \$110,000, said Painesville City Manager Rita McMahon.

Lake County Commissioner Daniel Troy, who attended the news conference, believes equipment sharing makes sense.

He said the effort is not to create one government "where everybody loses their local control," but to figure out how resources can be allocated between neighboring localities more cost-effectively.

"I'm a firm believer that we need to blur a lot of these lines," he said.

The study did not evaluate snow-removal equipment, Troy said, because those are trucks that everybody generally needs at the same time, and nobody will want to be the one to wait while another community's roads are cleared.

"Snow removal is a political landmine," Troy said.

Yost said a new state law makes it easier for localities to share their equipment by specifically allowing for such cooperation and removing some of the legal impediments to doing so. He said all 88 counties could benefit.

Troy said if Lake County can come up with a workable plan, it could serve as a "best practices model" for the rest of the state.

The next step for Lake County will be to bring local officials together to try and turn the study into savings.

"The challenge is obviously going to be how do you implement a shared services program," McMahon said.

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It determined that most is duplicated and underused.

Among the findings: Asphalt paving machines were only used 3.4 percent of the time they were available.

The rate was a little higher, 7.6 percent, for road graders, while bulldozers were the most efficiently used piece of equipment at 48.4 percent.

A certain excess capacity will always be needed to accommodate breakdowns and repairs, Yost said.

"I think it's a step in the right direction," Eastlake Mayor Ted Andrzejewski said of the study. The question now is how to put the information to practical use.

For example, if there's a bulldozer to be shared, he said, it has to be decided who will store it and who will do the maintenance.

Yost commissioned the study, selecting Lake County, in part, because of its history of cooperation among local governments and because it's in the snow belt, where heavy equipment gets plenty of use.

"The roads take more of a beating in Northeast Ohio," he said.

Information was collected on 390 pieces of equipment, but only 177 pieces, or 45 percent, could be adequately evaluated, according to the report.

For example, of the seven asphalt paving machines in the county, only four could be analyzed.

The study does not predict savings if such a sharing program is implemented, but Yost estimated it would be "six figures" over a two-year budget cycle. There would also be millions of dollars in one-time savings from the sale of equipment no longer considered necessary, he said.